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ABSTRACT

Job stress among institutional researchers and approaches to managing or coping with stress are considered. In considering different types of stressors and stress reactions, it is noted that stress from all sources is cumulative and cannot be ignored during the workday, and that both pleasant and unpleasant happenings can result in stress. One source of stress for the institutional researchers is their tendency to work with and depend upon a number of other persons and offices without having any direct control. In addition, there is little extrinsic recognition for the work of institutional researchers, which often involves sensitive data and issues that must be treated neutrally without publcity. Physically, excess stress causes such symptoms as fatigue, muscle tension, and susceptibility to illness. Prolonged stress can lead to depression, boredom, and negative attitudes about work and others, as well as poor performance (i.e., burnout). Five suggestions for managing stress are offered. The following conclusions are offered: stress is real and can become serious; family stress cannot be ignored during working hours, and job tensions cannot be left at the office; and stress cannot be avoided, but must be managed. (SW)

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Coping Strategies for Job Stress Among Institutional Researchers

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THE ASSOCIATION FOR INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH

This paper was presented at the Twenty-Third Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research held at the Sheraton Centre in Toronto, Ontario, May 23-26, 1983. This paper was reviewed by the AIR Forum Publications Committee and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC Collection of Forum papers.

D. R. Coleman, Chairman
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Coping Strategies for Job Stress Among Institutional Researchers

Anxiety, worry, frustration, boredom, fatigue, stress, burnout, etc., etc., etc. are all terms that describe physical/emotional conditions which have been with us for a long time but which have only become "popular" phenomena recently. Fortunately for today's manager or worker, job stress is becoming widely recognized, and there is some hope that we may be able to alleviate some of the more negative aspects of it. Too often do we read of people "retiring" on the job or of the burned-out school teacher, social worker, or policeman who just could not take it any longer. People are the most important resource of many organizations and certainly each of us is quite important to ourselves as a well, whole, and healthy human being. Why, then, do we subject ourselves to the tensions we all face while forever vowing that everything is fine!

Stress is the focus of this brief paper with specific focus on job stress among institutional researchers. While the underlying feeling among persons who are newly introduced to the perils of too much stress is often that all stress is to be avoided, this is not true since controlled stress can be a powerful motivator to many people. Therefore, as the title suggests, this paper will focus on managing or coping with stress rather than on eliminating it entirely. As we shall see later, stress cannot be avoided so it is important that we learn to live with it under conditions which we choose. Even high stress which is normally associated with unexpected heart attacks or similar undesirable side effects can be beneficial for us if we are able to reduce the stress to a more normal level in a relatively short period of time. Coping and managing stress are the answers to the burnout question, and this paper is aimed in that direction.

What is Stress?

From a physiological perspective, which is the proper one for successful stress management, stress is our "physical reaction to a bodily threat" (McCall, 1983). Primitive men and women were designed to react quickly and radically to stressful situations which were likely for them to be life threatening. Fight or flight were the alternatives available to our early forebears and the physical manifestations were a quickened heart beat to pump fresh blood and oxygen throughout the body, short rapid breaths of air to bring in the oxygen, dilated pupils to enable better vision, tensing of muscles for action, and general heightening of all senses. What stopped inside our bodies to permit us to make these other changes were digestion and, perhaps, higher level thought processes (reason).

While modern life for the most part has relieved mankind of daily fears for his very mortality, our bodies have not adapted to the differences around us. Very rarely do we face life-threatening situations but we react the same anyway. Think back to the last time you were nearly forced off the road by a passing truck or when you almost hit the kid on the bicycle who darted in front of you from an alley. Weren't your physical reactions similar to the early caveman's -- shortness of breath coming in quick gasps, muscle tenseness, heightened awareness through your senses, etc.

In similar fashion we basically confront all difficult or threatening situations with these physical changes in our bodies despite the fact that physical response -- fight or flight -- is rarely necessary. I am reminded, if the reader will permit a momentary digression, of one time when I was extremely frustrated and angered by my boss. My initial reaction upon attaining the sanctity of my own office was strong language and imaginary threats (fighting) which rapidly became the need to get out and walk off my anger (flight). Perhaps we are not as far from the caves as we like to think.

In considering, then, just what this thing called stress is, we must realize

that our everyday environment prompts physical reactions from us automatically. Whether we see a loose lion running towards us or receive a smashing kiss from a member of the opposite sex, our bodies react and this is stress. Obviously, not all stress arises from bad situations and, contrary to what popular beliefs may tell us, not all stress is bad for us (N.C. Memorial Hospital, 1982). Stress is, in fact, very important to our ability to change and to adapt to different circumstances and environments. Without stress we would not know to sweat (perspire) when we are hot or to shiver and get goose bumps when we are cold. Stress in and of itself is not harmful, but it can be harmful <u>if</u> we do not learn how to recover from its immediate effects on our bodies.

Before moving on to consider particular sources of stress for institutional researchers and other university managers, let us return for a moment to the idea that a "smashing kiss" is stressful. Most of us, at least intuitively, would say that a kiss is one of life's delights and not at all stressful unless, of course, one is caught kissing the wrong person perhaps. Stress, however, does not differentiate between good and bad sources -- the medical terms are eustress for the kiss (good stress) and distress for the bad or usual stress (Selye, N.D.:10) -- and our bodies tend to have the same physical responses. For that reason and to emphasize the previously mentioned point that we cannot avoid stress totally, we need to realize that stress comes from a variety of sources and that the cumulative effect, even including eustress, is a danger to us.

Sources of Stress Among Institutional Researchers

Despite our usual reputation among college and university administrative circles for being fearless, bold, and nearly impervious to harm, institutional researchers are subject to the same sources of stress as other, less perfect human beings. Before considering our own special sources of stress, then, we shall spend a few paragraphs on these more mundane sources simply because most

people just do not realize the possible scope of the problem.

First, all stress affects us and is cumulative. There is no such thing as job stress separate from family stress or money stress separate from marital stress. All stress is relevant to us at all times and the person who is perhaps most open to the harmful effects of stress is precisely the one who tends to deny stress in one part of his/her life while doing another part; for instance, the office worker who refuses to discuss an alcoholic spouse or terminally ill parent. Such people often believe that they are acting properly and that they are protecting their workplace by leaving personal issues at home. In fact, however, they may be doing serious damage to themselves and through them to their organization because stress cannot be ignored.

Stress among institutional researchers comes from all things; "if it was memorable, it was stressful," (N.C. Memorial Hospital, 1982: 3) captures the idea well. We all realize the normal events which cause stress -- a death in the family, losing one's job, getting a divorce, moving to a different community, etc. -- but we also must acknowledge the other events which introduce stress into our lives, and stress which we must handle. Such stressful events are major holidays, or vacations, a promotion at work, borrowing money, family squabbles, a change in one's boss, etc. The important thing is not that we list all the possible sources of stress or that we be able to add them up via numerical coefficients or weights; rather, the important thing is recognition of the stress and managing our lives so as to dissipate the physical effects.

Turning now to particular types of stress for institutional researchers, there are two areas which deserve mention. First is what I shall term the Coordination Syndrome which does not refer to our inability to rub our tummies with one hand while patting the top of our heads with the other hand. Coordination Syndrome, rather, refers to the tendency for institutional researchers to work with and depend upon a number of other persons and offices without having any direct control

over them. For example, any study of students requires approval or at least recognition by the Registrar, and if one is dependent upon the Registrar's staff for directly compiling the data, then the study must sit and wait until the Registrar so orders. Now, the intention is not to paint our colleagues as unreasonable ogres who thrive on thwarting our work, but it is true that we cannot, generally, order anyone to do anything for us. In fact the success which institutional researchers achieve in their jobs is often directly related to their ability to get along with others and to convince others to work for or with them voluntarily.

Using another office, student financial aid, as an example of control rather than coordination, the director of student aid after being asked for some vital statistics by the college president either drops what he or she is doing or tells the staff to drop what they are doing and gather the numbers for the president. That is control. If on the other hand the president called the institutional research office with a need for student aid data, then the institutional researcher must call the director of student aid and request the data. That is coordination - in simplified fashion.

In terms of stress the Coordination Syndrome represents uncertainty, anxiety, and untold future ulcers for the harried institutional researcher. Occasionally people wonder why institutional researchers are to data/information like magnets are to iron filings, and the simple answer is that the more data we have under our immediate control, the less we have to depend upon others to do our job. I have often seen my boss poring over old, dusty printouts into the wee hours of the morning because she preferred to get the data herself than to have to ask our computer staff for a special run which would have prompted bad feelings, excuses, and possibly a missed deadline. In short, the Coordination Syndrome reflects our heavy dependence on others to do our job.

The other special stress area close to the heart of institutional researchers

is what one may call, Effective Invisibility. To put this into simple, clear terms, institutional research is best practiced behind the scenes under the guise of neutrality with little external visibility and the result, in addition to doing the job well, is little extrinsic recognition. We all enjoy doing a good job and while it is not necessary that our work always be recognized and rewarded, it is nice occasionally to get a nice public pat on the back. Unfortunately since we are all busy and since we hate to ask for pats on the back, most of us merely continue busting our tails to do a good job and then fume about the resulting lack of recognition or we "retire on the job" figuring that if people wanted us to work hard, they would have rewarded us for doing that.

Effective Invisibility, though, cannot be claimed as the sole province of institutional research because lack of recognition for work well done is a widespread cause of stress throughout the world. Institutional researchers do face some problems in this area, because of the nature of their work, which tend to heighten the stress under which they must operate. Our work often involves sensitive data, concerns highly emotional issues, and requires considerable investment on our part to collect, analyze, and report the data without prejudice or publicity.

To summarize this section of the paper, the reader should recall that stress from all sources is cumulative and cannot be ignored for part of the working day; that everything important in our lives causes stress even if it is very pleasant; and that institutional researchers may be particularly sensitive to stress because of the Coordination Syndrome and Effective Invisibility.

Results of Stress

Okay, now that you are under considerable stress wondering how harmful stress really is, you are probably ready for some answers to the problem. Be patient for a little while longer though, while we explore the results of stress and then we shall look at handling stress.

Physically, excess stress causes "chronic fatigue, low energy, headaches, muscle tension, and susceptibility to sickness, with frequent attacks of virus and flu. Weariness plagues the day, insomnia the night. There is strong temptation to try quick fixes: alcohol, heavy smoking, drugs, tranquilizers, and overeating" (Wakin, 1983: 43). Psychologically and emotionally, prolonged and severe stress leads to feelings of depression, apathy, guilt, hopelessness, boredom, and pessimism; to negative attitudes about one's work, coworkers, friends, and family; to poor work on the job and increased absenteeism; and to loss of self-confidence (Maher, 1983).

In the common vernacular, stress which has reached the point of being characterized by the preceding symptoms, is known as burnout.

> For the burnout victim, work becomes a treadmill, a pointless activity. Just getting up in the morning and going to work is a chore and, once there, getting anything done is a major effort. It's difficult to pay attention, return phone calls, attend meetings or carry out assignments. One who has burned out works harder and longer, yet gets less done. Finally, he faces the serious danger of becoming immobilized by sickness, by a quick fix (such as heavy drinking) or by psychological breakdown.
>
> (Wakin, 1983: 43)

Severe stress leads to burnout, and burnout is a serious physical and psychological affliction which, fortunately, can be avoided. And, that brings us to the final section on managing stress.

Coping with Stress and Avoiding Burnout

The common notion on how to avoid stress can be termed the beer and hammock reflex (N.C. Memorial Hospital, 1982) but these props offer no guarantee for reducing stress in our lives. We all know of people who work harder at relaxing than in the office so it is quite possible to spend lots of time in the hammock without lowering one's stress-induced tensions at all. Gimmicks are readily available in all parts of our lives as the easy way to do anything but gimmicks are not

the answer. Stress builds up over time as a result of our way of life and the way we act; positive change can only come in similar fashion -- slowly and through real differences in our life.

Relaxation is of great value in making us feel better, in refreshing us for more and better work, and in helping us manage stress. Yet, relaxation must be approached with a serious though not necessarily competitive attitude because it is more than fun; it is, in fact, vitally important to us. Three rules come to mind to guide our pursuit of relaxation: 1) choose something you really enjoy and not something your friends, spouse, or coworkers urge you to try; 2) do not be afraid to try new and different things; and 3) remember that relaxation and not the activity itself is the ultimate aim (Public Health Service, 1978).

Since relaxation is not the total answer, we must also learn to manage stress in our work. As institutional researchers we may not always feel that we have a great deal of control over our lives -- we cannot ignore that deadline just because it is stressful -- but there are things we can do to alter our own perspective on our work and its ability to cause stress. McCall (1983) lists five steps for moving stress to success in the workplace.

First, a positive mental attitude is a must. For the most part, we are not being persecuted by others, we are loved by our loved ones, and the world is not against us. Likewise we need to have our own limits or rights which even we respect -- yes, that's right -- respect yourself and your own abilities. Believe that it is okay to say no occasionally to others' demands so that you can do a better job with your current task or so that you can stop to smell the roses every so often. People, generally, have little respect or appreciation for someone who has none for himself or herself.

Second, view unpleasant circumstances in your job, family, church, etc. as real opportunities rather than as threats. Not every cloud does have a silver lining, but there are more hidden smiles out there than we often expect.

Third, practice what McCall calls "damage control" which is, as he so skillfully phrased it, change what you can, accept what you can't, and learn to know the difference between them - quickly. In short spend your efforts where results are likely and skip agonizing over things beyond control. Damage control, however, must not be confused with another administrative strategy termed, C.Y.A. or cover your posterior. C.Y.A. is a purely defensive ploy while damage control can be used to take the offensive in working for positive change. We all need to be concerned about our posteriors, nevertheless, but excessive worrying does not guarantee better protection.

Fourth, persons working to manage stress must have positive goals and not just "do things" to get through the day. As was mentioned earlier, one sympton of stress is working harder and harder while accomplishing less and less. By focusing on those things most important to our work or other activity, we avoid the stress-related chicken without a head syndrome.

Fifth and finally, McCall urges us to train ourselves to choose between positive objectives rather than to always see things as good or bad. This relates back both to the importance of a positive mental attitude and to the need to see unpleasanties as challenging opportunities, but it adds a new dimension. One can see positive objectives, oftentimes, by looking beyond the immediate task to the goal or aim which lies ahead. For instance, your business vice president asks for cost per credit hour figures in six disciplines across the campus. While your initial reaction may not be too positive, you may begin to see the request in a more favorable light when you realize that this is but a step towards a goal which you may have been seeking - learning more about campus fiscal affairs.

Conclusion

Three things deserve brief mention in summary. One, stress is real and can become a very serious affliction. Just because institutional researchers are

part of the "Ivory Tower" where stress is much less than in the "real" world of business, is no reason for us to ignore the dangers of stress and burnout.

Two, stress comes at us from all angles and in all situations. We cannot ignore family stress during working hours anymore than we leave job tensions at the office.

Three, stress cannot be avoided; it must be managed. Stress is not inherently bad for us and, as was mentioned, it is quite important to us in adapting to change. But, uncontrolled and unrelieved, prolonged stress is a killer. Learn to live with stress and live longer.

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